

## ADULT RELIGIOUS EDUCATION AT THE QUR'ANIC COURSES IN MODERN TURKEY

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### Abstract

One of the most controversial issues in Turkey is the question of religious education. The reason is clear; while the state has a secular structure, the overwhelming majority of the population is Muslim and their religious needs must be met. Because of this irony, religious education has become a serious question in the history of the Republic of Turkey. While at some times it is strictly forbidden, at others it is left free. But the state has always held it under its control. However, while religious teaching in the schools has been continuously changed since the establishment of the Republic, the Qur'anic Courses have never been closed. They have even been supported by the state itself. This article, first, examines the place of Qur'anic teaching and courses in the Muslim world throughout Islamic history. Second and in particular, it focuses on the historical development of the Qur'anic Courses, their curriculum, and target groups in the Republic of Turkey.

**Key Words:** Religious Education, Turkey, Adult Education, Quranic Courses

### Introduction

According to Islamic teachings, having knowledge is an obligation on each Muslim man and woman. The religion of Islam accepts the principle of expanding knowledge for all people who are capable of learning. This includes adults and elderly people too. From this perspective, education is accepted as a process that "continues from cradle to the grave." It is well known that the first verse and command sent to Prophet Muhammad was "Read!" The understanding of the significance of this resulted in the close companions of the Prophet continuously learning and teaching for the rest of their lives.

Since the time of Prophet Muhammad, the source of religious education, the Qur'an has held an important place in the Muslim world. This is evident in that Muslims have given great and special significance to the teaching of the Qur'an throughout Islamic history. Naturally, the Qur'an was the first course in the curriculum of many Muslim countries. One example of this is the great importance to the teaching of the Qur'an that the Ottomans displayed in taking it as the priority in all their educational settings. The teaching of the Qur'an has continued in various institutions in modern Turkey as well.

This article deals with the station of teaching Qur'an in general and the historical developments of the state's official Qur'anic course program managed under Turkey's Presidency of Religious Affairs and its current situation from the aspect of adult religious education in particular.

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### Teaching Qur'an and Qur'anic Courses in History

The sacred book of the Muslims, the Qur'an, has always held a crucial place in the lives of Muslim communities. Through the centuries, Muslims have primarily tried to shape their lives and cultures by taking inspiration from the Qur'an (Aşıkoğlu, 1997, 172).

Given that the Qur'an entails the language of prayer for Muslims, religious education and teaching in Islam began first by teaching the Qur'an. Knowing some parts of the Qur'an is a requirement on every Muslim in order to perform his/her five daily prayers. In addition, without knowing the Qur'an, it is not possible to know the religious commands and prohibitions or how to perform other religious duties (Ay, 1995, 21; Kazıcı, 2000, 33).

There is in both the Qur'an itself and traditions of Prophet Muhammad very important information concerning the teaching of the Qur'an. The following and similar hadith, accounts of sayings or deeds of Prophet Muhammad, encourage Muslims to learn and teach the Qur'an. The Prophet said, "The most pious people among you are those who learn and teach the Qur'an." (Buharî, Fedailü'l-Kur'an, 21; Tirmizî, Fedailü'l-Kur'an, 15; Ebu Davud, Salat, 343; İbn Mace, Mukaddime, 16). As a result of this understanding, Muslims accept such efforts as an important responsibility. Those who cannot learn it during childhood try to learn it in their adult years.

The first words of the Qur'an were revealed by God to Prophet Muhammad on Mount Hira as Archangel Gabriel was ordered to teach it in the Prophet's native tongue, Arabic. Thereafter a house in Mecca called "Dâru'l-Erkam" (meaning the "House of Erkam") was the first place in which it was taught and the message of Islam was conveyed to his followers. Before the Prophet's immigration to Medina, the house of Sa'd b. Zûrare became the city's first location for the teaching of the Qur'an. After the immigration of Prophet Muhammad to Medina, the school of *Suffa* in the Prophet's Mosque, Masjid-i Nabawi, served as an educational institution for Muslims in teaching and learning the Qur'an. When the *Suffa* became insufficient for this aim, new educational institutions were established in Medina. In the second year after the migration, an important educational institution called "Dâru'l-Kurrâ" was built in the house of Mahreme b. Nevfer (Hamidullah, 1968, 77).

During the time of Caliphs Abu Bakr and Umar, activities for teaching the Qur'an increasingly continued. Caliph Umar himself gave great importance to the teaching of the Qur'an through sending Qur'an teachers to all cities, ordering all governors of provinces to ensure that all the people had access to opportunities for learning the Qur'an, and asking them to periodically report on the number of *hafiz* (people who know the entire Qur'an by heart). The third caliph, Uthman, was also concerned about the teaching of the Qur'an. Upon recognizing some problems regarding the reading style of the Qur'an, Uthman asked all the *hafiz* to come together and make copies of the Qur'an based on the original collected by the first caliph, Abu Bakr, and then he distributed them. These endeavors indicate how concerned the caliphs were about the teaching of the Qur'an (Ay, 1995, 24-28).

During the time of the Umayyad and Abbasid, some independent and organized institutions were commissioned to teach the Qur'an. Throughout the Muslim world, the Qur'an was read and memorized by the students in these institutions called "Dâru'l-Kurrâ". Such institutions, places of Qur'anic instruction, and activities for teaching the Qur'an continued throughout Islamic history without interruption (Çelebi, 1983, 38-48; Baltacı, 1976, 8-10; Akyüz, 1993, 20).

In the time of the Ottoman Empire, the primary schools (called *Sıbyan Mektepleri*) were open for the purpose of teaching the Qur'an and giving some basic Islamic knowledge to young children. In addition, at the middle and secondary school levels, the curriculums of *Rüşdiye*, *İdadiye*, *Sultaniye* (primary and secondary school level) and *Dâru'lmuallimin* (a kind of teachers' college) included the teaching of the Qur'an (Öcal, 2005, 84; Mehmedoğlu, 2001; Yücel, 1994, 141-227).

Since the establishment of the Ottoman State, imams (leaders of the Muslim congregational prayers and religious community) were generally educated at Dâru'l-Kurrâ facilities. There were two types of Dâru'l-Kurrâ: lower and higher levels. When a student graduated from a *Sıbyan* (primary) school, he used to go to the lower level of Dâru'l-Kurrâ to accomplish his memorizing of the Qur'an, and then he would continue his religious education at the higher level of Dâru'l-Kurrâ (Taşköprülüzade, 1313, 141,144; Öcal, 2005, 85). And yet, these places were not only for the teaching and memorization of the

Qur'an. In these places, as in today's Qur'anic Courses, the belief system of Islam and religious practices were also taught.

During the time of Ottomans, people gave great importance to these Dâru'l-Kurrâ because they served as professional *madrasas* (places of learning). In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, there were fifteen Dâru'l-Kurrâ in the cities of Amasya, Istanbul, Edirne and Tire further indicating this truth (Kazıcı, 2000, 36; Baltacı, 1976, 23, 607-611; Kayadibi, 2000, 63).

### Teaching Qur'an and Qur'anic Courses after the Declaration of the Republic

Since Turkish society has also given great importance to the reading, memorizing, understanding, and teaching of the Qur'an, in the time of the Republic, all educational institutions including the Qur'anic Courses were transferred to the Ministry of Education by the Law of the Unification of Education dated March 3, 1924, and Article 430. As such, Qur'anic Courses make up the common religious educational institution that aims at teaching and memorizing the whole Qur'an, giving basic Islamic religious knowledge and conveying values to all age groups. This consequently is the Presidency of Religious Affairs' most important duty for its main purpose is to enlighten people in religious affairs. Thus, the Turkish Constitution itself commends this important responsibility and obligation to it.

However, the *madrasas* (higher Islamic educational institutions) were closed a few days after the passing of the Law of the Unification of Education. In the meantime, "Daru'l Kurra" facilities, accepted as professional *madrasas*, were also closed (Baltacı, 1999, 183).

With the Law of the Unification of Education, Article 429 on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of March 1924 also abolished the Religious Courts and Religious Foundations. In addition, Article 677 abolished all dervish orders on the 30<sup>th</sup> of November in the same year. With all of these developments and in order to meet the religious needs of the people, the Law's Article 429 established the Presidency of Religious Affairs on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of March 1924 defining its purpose as follows: "To direct the affairs pertaining to the beliefs of the Muslims' religion and the foundation of worship and morals, to enlighten the population on the subject of religion and administer places of worship." In addition, according to this law, all imams, *muezzins* (those who give the call to prayer from the minaret), and preachers were appointed and organized by the Presidency of Religious Affairs. While the Faculty of Divinity was opened by the Law of the Unification of Education at the University of Daru'l Funun in Istanbul, all Imam and Preacher Schools were closed for various reasons such as an insufficient number of students. And yet, the Qur'anic Courses have never been closed throughout the history of the Republic and have continued their educational activities to date (Ayhan, 2004, 495).

When the Law of the Unification of Education was accepted, some people advocated that the Qur'anic Courses had to be transferred to the Ministry of National Education. However, the first President of Religious Affairs, Rifat Börekçi, tried to open new Qur'anic Courses instead of Daru'l Kurra. On 2 April 1925 with the endeavors of Rifat Börekçi and upon the request of fifty deputies, the Turkish government allocated 50.00 Turkish Liras to the Qur'anic Courses for the aim of Qur'an memorization, "*Hafız-ı Qur'an*" (Baltacı, 1999, 183).

After several changes in the Law (1935, 1939, 1950, 1955) concerning the status of the Presidency of Religious Affairs, a new law, Article 633, was enacted relating to its establishment and duties on 22 June 1965. Item 7 of this new law gave the duty of administration and executive powers of the Qur'anic Courses to the Presidency of Religious Affairs in cooperation with the Ministry of National Education.

In order to execute its duties, the Presidency of Religious Affairs prepared "Special Instructions for the Qur'anic Teaching Courses" in 1965. In 1971, "The Regulation of Qur'anic Courses of the Presidency of Religious Affairs" was enacted. This code was applied until 1990 with a few minor changes in some articles. While various changes and regulations concerning the Qur'anic Courses were made between 1990 and 1999, one of the most important among them was the last regulation made on 22 July 1999. Before this regulation, everyone irrespective of his/her age could attend the Qur'anic Courses.

With this new regulation, only those who had graduated from eighth grade could go to the Qur'anic Courses. It is still valid today.

### **The Number of Qur'anic Courses after the Declaration of the Republic**

The number of Qur'anic Courses has continuously changed throughout the history of the Republic. Their numbers increased and decreased based on some important events. In 1925, only nine Qur'an teachers benefited from the appropriations of that year's budget. Although the amount of money was very small, it was an important step in the Turkish government's acceptance of its legality; thus the first Qur'anic teaching institutions were opened under the name "Qur'anic Course" (Baltacı 1999, 183; Öztürk, 2000, 178).

While there were ten Qur'anic Courses between the years of 1925-1931, this number dropped to nine in 1934 and seven in 1935. Later, their numbers increased to 21 (Öcal, 2005, 87; Ay, 1995, 25; Öztürk, 2000, 179). Here, the important thing is not whether their numbers increased or decreased, but whether Qur'anic Courses existed or not. According to the estimation of Akgün, while there were nine to ten staff from 1927 to 1933, in practice, all Qur'anic educational activities did not take place in those Qur'anic Courses. In the academic year of 1934-1935, records show that only one Qur'anic Course continued its educational activities (Akgün, 2000, 188). However, when the democratic process began to appear, the numbers of the Qur'anic Courses began to meaningfully increase. For example, while there were only fifteen Qur'anic Courses in the academic year 1935-1936, this number reached 65 in the 1940s. With the coming of Democratic Party in the year 1949-1950, this number reached 127 (Jaschke, 1972, 76).

During the time of Democratic Party, the number of Qur'anic Courses reached 301. After the military coup of 27 May 1960, the number continued to rise and reached 434 in the academic year of 1964-1965. When the Justice Party came to power in 1965, the number of the Qur'anic Courses began to increase very rapidly and reached 786 in 1971 when another military coup took place. The number of the Qur'anic Courses continued to go up from that date. Their count became 1,538 in the 1978-1979 academic year (Öcal, 2005, 91-92; Ay, 1995, 25). Lastly after the military coup of 12 September 1980, the number of Qur'anic Courses increased regularly and reached 5,241 in the academic year of 1996-1997. During this time, not only did the number of the Qur'anic Courses increase but also the students attending them. For example, while the academic year 1979-1980, the number of students attending Qur'anic Courses was 68,486, in 1994-1995 the student count was 163,444 (the highest number in the entire the history of the Republic) dropping to 89,338 in 1999-2000. As of 2004, it was 109,124 (Öcal, 2005, 93).

The most important development in terms of the Qur'anic Courses occurred in 1997 when Turkish Grand National Assembly extended the duration of primary school from five years to eight years. While before that time, the students would go to the Qur'anic Courses when they graduated from the fifth grade, with this new law, they would go only after their completion of the eighth grade. As a result of this alteration, the number the Qur'anic Courses dramatically dropped to 3,811 in the academic year of 2003-2004 (Öcal, 2005, 93).

As it can be understood from this brief explanation of the historical development of the Qur'anic Courses, their opening since the establishment of the Republic to date, educational activities, administration and control have been run by the Presidency of Religious Affairs in cooperation with the Ministry of National Education which is still true today.

These Qur'anic Courses with their deep historical background and important contribution to shaping Turkish national culture, in our time, are important educational centers where both the younger generation and adult population pursue their religious training. Through these courses, people from all ages can have knowledge about basic principles of Islam, religious practices and ethical behaviors that are very important for the society. In addition, especially girls and women have a chance to read the Qur'an and learn its meaning, acquire basic knowledge about Islam, and more importantly, accept Prophet Muhammad as a model in their daily lives. In short, the Qur'anic Courses have continued their activities today as important educational centers for all age groups and sexes.

### **The Curriculum of the Qur'anic Courses**

The Presidency of Religious Affairs prepares the curriculum of the Qur'anic Courses. As said before, graduates from eighth grade (eight years of education being compulsory for every Turkish citizen) and adults can attend these courses. While before 1997 (when the primary school's duration was extended to eight years), mostly children and adolescents used to go to these courses. After that time, the size of the adult population attending these courses increased very rapidly. For example, ninety percent of the 109,124 students attending these courses in the academic year of 2004-2005 were 18 years old and beyond.

As a result of these developments in terms of the profile of the students, the Presidency of Religious Affairs prepared a special "Curriculum of the Qur'anic Courses" for the reading of the Qur'an in 2004. Today, these Qur'anic Courses have continued their educational activities based on this new curriculum.

Although the Qur'anic Courses try to teach the reading of the Qur'an, the basic principles of Islam, religious practices and moral behaviors based on the Qur'an and hadith, they make no distinction between child and adult learning styles. However, it is known that the learning styles of adults are different from those of children. While there are many differences between the teaching of children and adults, one of the most important differences is that adults decide for themselves what they want to learn. Contrary to children and youth, adults voluntarily participate in these kinds of programs, and they want programs useful to their daily lives. Therefore, the following question is quite important: Who will prepare the curriculum of the Qur'anic Courses? Will the Presidency of Religious Affairs, the teachers, or the adults themselves prepare these programs?

Since the adults know better which subjects are good and appropriate for them and what they need, they should contribute to the preparation of the curriculum. Although the main responsibility for teaching belongs to the teachers, adults themselves should also help in this process. In fact, this is a modern approach in adult education, called *andragogy* (Köylü, 198; Okçabol, 1996, 75; Knowles, 1980, 50-53).

Although some research supports our claim concerning the process of curriculum preparation, (Wicket, 1986, 92-93), the current situation in Turkey is very different from that of other countries. Research done by Kılavuz confirms this fact. When Kılavuz asked 255 adults who should prepare the curriculum of the Qur'anic Courses, the following answers were obtained: 43.5 percent of the adults wanted the curriculum to be prepared by the Presidency of Religious Affairs, 48.3 percent said the teacher and administrators of the Qur'anic Courses, and just 8.2 percent said that "adult learners" should prepare the curriculum themselves (Kılavuz, 2005, 121).

Kılavuz explained this situation as follows: Since the adult learners thought that the reading of the Qur'an and some basic religious knowledge met their needs and were enough for them, they might think that the preparation of the curriculum by the Presidency of Religious Affairs or the teachers and administrators of the Qur'anic Courses would be better. In addition, the effect of traditional culture still prevalent in Turkey should be taken into consideration. For according to the traditional culture, the preferences of the state and its institutions are more important than individual preferences (Dökmen, 1999, 219-272). From this perspective, adults might think that the Presidency of Religious Affairs and its institutions have prepared the most appropriate curriculum for them.

In addition, these results indicate that the adults attending these courses trust these institutions. However, it must also be taken into consideration that some people think this curriculum does not meet their needs, so they do not go to these courses. Thus, if the curriculum were prepared in accordance with the needs of the learners, the number of adults attending these courses may increase.

### **The Subjects Taught at the Qur'anic Courses**

The teaching of subjects at the Qur'anic Courses is determined based on of the regulations of the Presidency of Religious Affairs. These regulations are founded on Article 27 of "The Regulations of the



Qur'anic Courses" which stipulates the following: 18 credit hours for the reading of the Qur'an, one credit hour for the belief system of Islam, three credit hours for religious practices such as prayer, fasting, almsgiving, etc., one credit hour for the life of the Prophet, and one credit hour for ethics. Thus, it has 24 credit hours total (Kur'an Kursları Yönetmeliği, 1997, 9).

As is obvious, the most importance is given to the reading of the Qur'an. Some reasons for this structure may be as follows: First of all, the Qur'an is the first reference book for Muslims. When they meet any religious problem, they immediately turn to the Qur'an for the solution. In the daily prayers and other religious activities, the Qur'an is read. In addition, both God through His words in the Qur'an itself and Prophet Muhammad have encouraged Muslims to read the Qur'an. Reading the Qur'an is itself a kind of prayer and a meritorious act. Thus, the Qur'an has had a special place in Muslim communities' daily lives. Because of that, it is quite normal for the Qur'anic Courses to give such significance to reading of the Qur'an.

The course on religious practices is three credit hours in a week and includes the rules of the prayers and other religious duties. Through this course, attendees learn their responsibilities toward God and how to live in accordance with their belief system. In a way, this course is practice of their learning.

Very important among others is the course on the belief system in Islam called *itikat*. Although it is just one credit hour, it contains many significant topics such as belief in God and His attributes, the prophecy of Prophet Muhammad and the other prophets, the hereafter, the responsibilities of human beings, free will and destiny, etc. Through this course, students learn the basic beliefs of Islam contained in the Qur'an and other sound sources.

The life of Prophet Muhammad called *siyar* is also one credit hour. As is known, belief in the Prophet plays a central role in Islam. Although this course aims at teaching the students the historical background of Prophet Muhammad, his life style, his understanding of war and peace, and his statesmanship, the main purpose of this course is to help them model their lives after his. In fact, this situation is clearly indicated in the Qur'an. The Qur'an reads, "Indeed in the Messenger of Allah (Muhammad) you have a good example to follow for him who hopes in (the Meeting with) Allah and the Last Day and remembers Allah much (Qur'an 33:21).

As for the course of ethics, it contains the moral principles presented in the Qur'an and hadith. The aim of this course is to make a bridge between principles of faith and religious practices given that the main purpose of many religious practices is to make believers into good men/women of society.

In Akif's research, it was found that most adults wanted to take the course for reading the Qur'an. Then the topic of prayer, Islamic belief system, the life of the Prophet and morality followed (Kılavuz, 2005, 132). These results indicate that most adults go the Qur'anic Courses to learn to read the Qur'an.

The reasons why they mostly prefer learning the Qur'an are clear. First, without knowing the Qur'an it is not possible to perform some religious duties. Second, reading Qur'an itself is a kind of prayer, so some people read the Qur'an constantly as a communication with God. Third, the Qur'an is the foundational source of Islam and contains its basic principles.

The course of religious duties is also important for adults as is evident in their preference for it being second place only to the reading of the Qur'an. One of the most important reasons why they give it such priority is that they want to fulfill their responsibilities toward God. In Islam, although performing the religious duties is not a requirement of belief, it is a fact that it is not possible to be a good believer without performing religious duties such as praying, fasting and almsgiving, etc.

Then the course on the belief system of Islam comes in third. According to Akif's evaluation, since adults do not generally have any faith problems and are not much interested in the philosophical and theological matters, they do not really need the theological matters. They have a belief and want to continue their belief as it is.

Fourth in order is the course on the life of Prophet Muhammad. It must be mentioned here that this result does not mean that they do not give sufficient importance to the life of the Prophet. In contrast, since they have opportunity to hear about his life almost everywhere including the mosques, TV channels,

and from other sources, they put this course in order fourth. In addition, they can acquire knowledge about his life on their own through reading books, watching TV, etc.

According to the research, the last preference of the adults is the course on morality. There are various reasons for this result. First of all, they have already accomplished their moral development at these ages. Secondly, whether they take this kind of course or not, they have already established moral identities. Since childhood, many sources including family, school, and society have forced them to behave morally. Lastly, adults give more importance to behavior than theoretical knowledge.

These results also indicate that the hours the curriculum dedicates to these subjects in the Qur'anic Courses fit the order of the adults' preferences (Kılavuz, 2005, 135-141).

### Conclusion

The increasing number of adults attending the Qur'anic Courses gives a great hope for the future of adult religious education in Turkey. Previously, most of the students going to the Qur'anic Courses were young children and adolescents. However, for various reasons, the adult population has also begun to participate in this kind of religious education. One of the most important reasons for this trend is the restriction of official religious education at Imam and Preacher Schools and the ages of students allowed to attend the Qur'anic Courses. While before 1999, young children could also attend these Qur'anic Courses, after that time, only those who graduated from eighth grade could participate.

Although the great majority of adults are happy with the curriculum prepared by the Presidency of Religious Affairs in terms of meeting their needs, the education of the Qur'anic Courses is limited to only the teaching of the Qur'an and some basic religious knowledge. In fact, the Qur'anic Courses should not only address the needs of those who want to read the Qur'an and acquire basic Islamic knowledge but also consider those who have a particular educational level. Therefore, the quality of Qur'anic Courses should be raised and address the needs of all kinds of people not only a particular group.

With this framework, these institutions could organize various programs for adults in addition to the religious courses. In case of particular needs and wants, the adults attending these courses should be divided into various groups in accordance to their needs. For example, they can be divided into groups such as married and single, young and adult, men and women, etc. In addition, to be more effective and useful, the Qur'anic Courses should be organized according to the level of religious knowledge of the students. Thus, these schools can extend their educational activities to a broader population.

In order to change the current structure of the Qur'anic Courses, some Qur'anic Courses might be chosen as models. These special locations could be re-organized in accordance with the new model offered. Should these new organizations become successful, other Qur'anic Courses could also be organized according to this new model.

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